

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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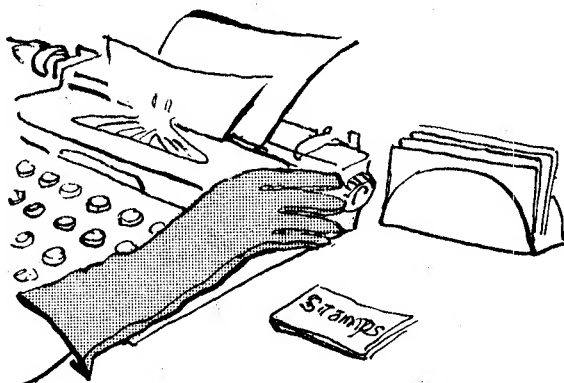
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One really needs an inside track if he wishes to curtail progress.

To the Barricades!

by
Jack Ritchie



I reread the news item. It seemed that a construction worker, one Mike Higgins, had fallen off the top of one of the huge pillars being erected to support the new North-South freeway and had fatally broken his neck. There had been no witnesses to the accident, Higgins having evidently lingered on the job after his co-workers had departed for the day.

I put on my rubber gloves and rolled a sheet of paper into the typewriter.

Mayor Swenson:

I can no longer allow you and your kind to displace families and uproot established neighborhoods in the name of freeway construction and dubious progress.

Peaceful protests by the citizenry and meetings with officialdom have proved fruitless in the past. The time has come for direct action.

Therefore I hereby take matters into my own hands and declare war on all those individuals who are engaged in any capacity whatsoever in work connected with the construction of these abominations.

TO THE BARRICADES!

As a beginning, I would like to bring to your attention the demise of one Mike Higgins, who "fell" from a pillar at the construction site of the North-South freeway yesterday.

He did not fall.

I pushed him. He is the first, and there will be others.

Concerned Citizen and Defender of Established Neighborhoods

I addressed an envelope, applied a stamp, and went out to mail the letter.

I had not, of course, pushed Higgins off the pillar.

However, it was now my intention to *appear* to have committed the "murder" and a number of others that seemed sure to follow.

There are literally thousands of people connected with the construction of a freeway; and during the course of the year or so required to complete the North-South freeway, some of them were bound to expire, on the job or off, naturally or accidentally. It was a matter of simple actuarial statistics. So, whenever the circumstances surrounding one of these deaths was the least bit cloudy, I would step into the breach to claim credit for yet another murder.

Mine is a neighborhood of small shops and restaurants interspersed

among single-family houses, duplexes, and rather aged three-story apartment buildings. None of our history has as yet been buried under a supermarket parking lot—or a freeway, for that matter. Families here have the habit of remaining for generation after generation, often in the same house. In short, we are a comfortable small town within a large city.

At seven the next evening, Waldo McCarthy, carrying his chess set, knocked at my apartment door.

Waldo is my cousin. He is also a lieutenant in the Detective Division of our police department, and he lives just down the hall.

I put a bowl of stick pretzels beside the chessboard and sat down. "How are things at headquarters?"

Waldo shrugged. "Same as always, Albert."

"Murders? Rapes? Bomb threats? I suppose even anonymous letters?"

Waldo opened with P-K4. "Speaking of letters, the mayor did send over two threatening letters he got this morning."

"Two?"

"There was this woman who threatened to throw a pie at the mayor's face if he didn't get the sidewalk in front of her house repaired. We talked it over with

her. So we talked it over. It was

I must have waited a long time for this. I mentioned

"Oh, he must have worked for the North-South freeway. Of course

I had heard the word letter before. "No

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her. She had the pie all right, but we talked her out of throwing it. It was delicious."

I moved my black to P-K4 and waited. Finally I said, "You mentioned *two* letters."

"Oh, yes. Some nut wrote that he murdered a construction worker because he wanted to stop the North-South freeway construction. We're looking into it, of course. Part of our job."

I had bristled slightly at the word "nut." "I don't imagine the letter was signed?"

"No. Though you'd be surprised how often an idiot like that will actually do it."

Idiot? I bit severely into a pretzel stick. "I suppose you tested for fingerprints?"

"Yes. There weren't any."

"Devilishly clever of the writer."

"Maybe. But as it is, we know a few things about him anyway."

"How could that be possible?"

"For one thing, I don't believe he's really concerned with the North-South freeway at all. If he is, he's too late to do anything about preserving the neighborhood anyway. All the land needed for the freeway has already been bought up and the buildings razed. So I think that he's really worried about the East-West freeway, which is still in the talk

stage, but evidently it's planned to plow through his neighborhood and he doesn't like that at all. So he really intends to scare people off freeways in general, especially before the East-West freeway gets off the ground, so to speak. And, of course, the writer is a man."

"How do you arrive at that?"

"Even in these days I hardly think that a woman would climb up a highway pillar to push somebody off."

I watched Waldo move N-KB3. "So that narrows it down to men living in old established neighborhoods in the path of the East-West freeway? That's hardly pinpointing it."

"Also he's over fifty and a little pompous."

"*Pompous?*"

"We arrive at that from the general tone of the letter. He uses words like 'demise,' for instance. 'Citizenry,' and 'officialdom.'"

I moved N-QB3. "Very well. So the police are looking for a man over fifty, possibly just a *touch* pompous, who lives in an old established neighborhood in the path of the proposed East-West freeway. There are a lot of old established neighborhoods in the path of the East-West freeway."

"Really fewer than you'd think. Actually he could come from anywhere around here."

TO THE BARRICADES!

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I went to the kitchen for a glass of water. I had been eating quite a few pretzels.

The next day's *Evening Standard* carried more news about the defunct Higgins.

The police, acting on an anonymous tip passed on to them by the mayor, had questioned Higgins' fellow workers and arrested a Frederick McNeil, 52, employed by the Van Dine Construction Company. McNeil had confessed to pushing Higgins off the pillar in a dispute over a loan. McNeil lived approximately three blocks from my apartment.

I felt a bit relieved by the turn of events in this particular case, however there still remained the problem of the freeway and I felt committed to stopping its construction. Call it my mission, if you will.

A week passed, during which I searched the *Evening Standard* each day until I found another item of interest. An Edward Minelli, 34, had gone off alone to fish in Lake Nagawicki. At the end of the day his boat had been found overturned and his body had been recovered in fourteen feet of water. He had been employed as a truck driver by the Hennessey Asphalt Company.

Hennessey Asphalt? Wasn't Hennessey Asphalt one of the sub-

contractors for the freeway construction? Of course. I had seen their trucks at the North-South construction site a number of times.

I put on my rubber gloves and slipped paper into the typewriter.

Dear Mayor Swenson:

Us working stiffs are getting sick and tired of City Hall pushing us around all the time, like ruining our neighborhoods by tearing them down, many of which houses is still livable and in good condition, and evicting us with no place to go.

You Eggheads think you can run everybody's life and build them freeways for which we got no use, not to mention the expense. When Law and Order break down, then it's up to patriotic citizens to do something about it, which I am.

I just pushed Ed Minelli of Hennessey Asphalt, which works on the freeway, out of his boat and he drowned. You'll find the story about him drowning on the same page of the paper which contains the cartoon "Adventures of Rick Ravine," whom I am also a fan of.

And the same will happen to anybody else what works for the Freeway Crowd.

Sincerely,
Hard Hat

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TO THE B

I felt rather proud of the letter. On Friday, Waldo showed up again with his chess set.

After the third move of our first game, I said, "Getting any more anonymous threatening letters?"

Waldo nodded. "The mayor got one from somebody who signed himself Hard Hat. Says he wants to stop freeway construction and is going to do it by murdering people."

"Ah," I said. "And were you able to deduce anything about the writer from the letter?"

"Well, for one thing, he reads or subscribes to the *Evening Standard*."

"How do you come to that conclusion?"

"He mentioned that the story of Ed Minelli's drowning appeared on the same page as 'Adventures of Rick Ravine.'"

"Ha," I said, "I happen to know that *both* of our evening papers carry the 'Adventures of Rick Ravine.'"

"Yes, but only the *Evening Standard* carried Minelli's drowning on the same page. Also, the writer is not a hard hat."

"Why not?" I demanded rather sharply.

"It's not logical. Hard hats are always in *favor* of construction, no matter what it is or where it's going to be. Besides, I doubt very

much if Hard Hat could type a letter of that length without making at least one typing error." Waldo shook his head. "No, Albert. The same person who wrote the first letter about Higgins also wrote the letter signed Hard Hat."

"How could you possibly come to such an idiotic conclusion? I imagine the literary *styles* of the letters must be poles apart."

"Yes. But both letters were written on the same typewriter."

"Oh," I said.

Waldo moved B-R4. "So the letter writer is a man over fifty who lives in an old established neighborhood in the path of the proposed East-West freeway, can type well, reads the *Evening Standard*, and is pompous."

Why did he dwell on pompous? Formal would have been a more accurate word. Or reserved. Something like that.

In Sunday's *Post Dispatch*—which I had decided to subscribe to—I read that the state police, spurred on by a tip forwarded to them from our mayor, had conducted a further investigation into the death of Ed Minelli. They dug up the fact that Minelli had last been seen in his boat with another man earlier on the afternoon of his death.

Scuba divers searching the area

of the drowning for another possible body, did not find one. However they did recover two fishing-tackle boxes, each of which carried an identity plate. One of the boxes belonged to Ed Minelli; the other to a Fred Nettleman, of Reedsville, a small town adjoining Lake Nagawicki.

The police found Fred Nettleman at home and very much alive. Further questioning brought forth the information that Nettleman had met Minelli in a lake-shore tavern on the afternoon of Minelli's death. After they downed a half dozen beers, they decided to go fishing together. They spent two hours on the lake, during which time they caught no fish, but did consume a case of beer. They quarreled over something which Nettleman did not now remember, and scuffled. The boat overturned.

Nettleman swam to shore, drove home, and promptly went to sleep. When he awakened and learned that Minelli, a nonswimmer, had drowned, he panicked and decided to remain quiet about the whole affair.

The next morning, as I left for work, I met Mrs. Pender in the hall. She is in her eighties, a widow, and has the apartment adjoining mine.

"Isn't it just terrible what hap-

pened to Mr. Wilson?" she said. "Wilson?"

"Yes. Top floor back, you know. Last night he was struck by a hit-and-run car and killed."

Wilson? Wilson? Oh, yes. I remembered him vaguely. A small man. A bachelor. Kept to himself. We'd never communicated with more than a nod in passing. I had put him down as a bookkeeper or clerk.

"He was a bookkeeper," I said, "wasn't he?"

"Yes. With the Burley Sand and Gravel Company."

Burley Sand and Gravel? Any company with a name like that *must* have something to do with freeway construction. Had I actually been harboring one of those freeway construction freaks in my own apartment building?

I went back to my apartment for my rubber gloves and stuffed them into my pocket.

During lunch period at the company, I remained behind and locked the door of my office.

I slipped on my rubber gloves, selected a sheet of paper, and began typing.

Your Honor, Mister Mayor:

Our high school class project this year is Ecology and we will all try to preserve our environment, each in his own way.

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which to my mind, you know, is anti-environmental. And it is up to us of the younger NOW Generation who are unafraid to half the sins of our fathers which are covering the landscape and disturbing the Balance of Nature and the Chain of Life.

As of this moment, I am dedicating my entire life and efforts, you know, to stopping freeway construction, which, if nothing else, you know, is the personification of faceless dehumanizing technology which seeks to turn all of us into faceless punch cards for computers.

Therefor earlier today, I borrowed Dad's car, and ran down James Wilson, who is associated, you know, with the Burley Sand and Gravel Company, which is affiliated through insidious means to the vested interests of freeway construction.

I am pledged to kill people—even though it makes me nauseous—who have sold themselves, you know, in any capacity whatsoever to the enemies of Ecology. Let there be no more Silent Springs.

Yours truly

The Good Seed

I reread the letter, verifying that I had made a number of intentional typing errors, and then sealed and mailed the letter.

TO THE BARRICADES!

When I arrived home late that afternoon, I read the account of Wilson's hit-and-run death in the *Post Dispatch*.

On the same page, I also found an item concerning a Ms. Bertha Thompson, 46, who had been found dead behind the wheel of her car in her own garage. The ignition key of her automobile was still turned on and the gas tank empty. She had last been seen leaving a party at the home of a friend. She had appeared to be in good spirits.

Probably she'd had a bit too much to drink, I thought. She had gotten safely to her garage, allowed the automatic door to close behind her, and then closed her eyes for just a moment, and gone to sleep with the motor of her car still running.

I read farther. An autopsy was scheduled. Ms. Thompson had worked as a private secretary to the president of Lakeside Hardware.

Lakeside Hardware? Wasn't Lakeside that gigantic four-story, block-long building down on Lincoln Avenue? Of course—and wasn't it one of the largest manufacturers of hardware in the Midwest?

Then surely it must have supplied some sort of hardware used in the construction of the North-

South freeway. It had to have.

I rubbed my jaw. Should the phantom letter writer strike again? And so soon?

It was perhaps pressing things a bit but, on the other hand, I might not find such an ideal unattended death in the newspapers again for some time.

I put on my rubber gloves and slipped paper into the typewriter. I wouldn't mail anything I typed on this particular machine again, of course, but at least I could rough out a draft. Tomorrow I would retype the letter on one of the office machines.

I hesitated a moment. Another letter from the high school student? No. Two murders in one day were a bit too much for a teen-ager.

Perhaps I should try the shotgun approach? A great many letters from a variety of people? Something was bound to kindle somewhere, wasn't it?

I was still typing when the knock came on my door. I glanced at my watch. Oh, yes. That would be Waldo.

I put the cover over the typewriter, removed my gloves, and stuffed them into a drawer before going to the door.

It wasn't until we started our second game, that I brought up the subject of letters again.

"How's the anonymous letter business?"

"Quite good," Waldo said. "We have another letter—came in late today. Same theme. This time the writer represents himself as a high school student."

"Really?"

Waldo nodded. "He claims to have killed someone who lived in this very building."

"My goodness," I said.

"The writer claims that he ran down James Wilson with his car."

I frowned. "Wilson? Wilson?" I shrugged. "Quiet chap. Kept to himself a lot. Worked for Burley Sand and Gravel. So the writer of the letter killed him?"

"No."

"What do you mean, no?"

"We've already booked the man who ran Wilson down. He's in his late seventies and probably shouldn't be driving a car at all. He felt a bump while he was out driving Sunday night, but didn't think he'd really hit anyone until he read about Wilson in the papers this morning. Then he put two and two together and turned himself in. The paint from his car fender matches that on Wilson's clothes."

I felt distinctly foiled. "Couldn't this high school student actually have borrowed the death car without the owner's knowledge,

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run down Wilson, and then re-
turned the vehicle? And the
owner, being in his seventies and
not quite clear of recollection,
might simply have *assumed* that
he had been involved in the acci-
dent?"

"Not too likely. Besides, the
third letter was written by the
same person who wrote the other
two."

I experienced a sort of fury.
"How the devil can you come to
a conclusion like that?" I man-
aged to control myself and pro-
duce a smile. "Was the last letter
written on the same typewriter as
the first two?"

"No. Different typewriters en-
tirely."

"Then what on earth makes you
so damn sure the last letter was
written by the same person who
wrote the first two?"

"The stamp on the envelope."

"The stamp? Fingerprints on
the stamp?"

"No," Waldo said. "No finger-
prints."

A sudden and wild thought
struck me. "Don't tell me you
compared the tongue-prints on the
backs of the stamps and they all
matched?"

Waldo blinked at the sugges-
tion. "Tongue-prints?" He nodded
thoughtfully. "Why not? After all,
we nailed that second-story man

by comparing his elbow with the
elbow-prints on a windowsill." Then he shrugged. "No. We didn't
compare tongue-prints. It was the
stamps themselves."

"But one blasted stamp looks
just like another."

"Well, yes. But the edges of the
stamps would vary a bit. Where
they were torn on the per-
forations, you know. We put them
under a microscope and found
that they had all been originally
adjacent. From the same stamp
book or sheet."

Waldo studied the chessboard,
then continued, "The person who
wrote those three letters lives in
this very building."

I cleared my throat. "How do
you arrive at that?"

Waldo moved N-B3. "Where
did you say that James Wilson
worked?"

"The Burley Sand and Gravel
Company."

Waldo shook his head. "No. He
was a janitor at the Slanky Toy
Company."

I frowned. "But Mrs. Pender
said—"

"She was wrong, Albert. She is
over eighty and confuses people
and time. The *previous* tenant of
Wilson's apartment worked for
Burley Sand and Gravel." He
looked up. "And that brings us to
a rather interesting point. Only

TO THE BARRICADES!

the writer of the letters, and Mrs. Pender, and you, Albert, think, or thought, that Wilson worked for Burley Sand and Gravel."

I felt a bit warm. "Mrs. Pender could have passed on that misinformation to *hundreds* of other people besides me."

Waldo smiled. "Possibly, Albert." He looked toward my covered typewriter. "I thought I heard you typing when I knocked."

"A personal letter," I said quickly. "Extremely personal."

Waldo rose and went to the typewriter.

"Waldo," I protested. "This is my private—"

Ignoring me, Waldo removed the typewriter cover and read the page still on the roller.

Dear Mayor or Chairperson of the City Council:

Well, I see that you men are bound and determined to destroy our lovely old established neighborhoods and landmarks by erect in those huge and ugly structures you call freeways.

For some time I have quietly

watched the many abuses of landscape and aesthetics by you Lords and Masters, but I can contain myself no longer. I am a person with an independent mind, not some plaything for a chauvinist pig. Which doesn't necessarily mean that I haven't had any offers!

Anyway, back to those dreadful freeways! Which reminds me, you don't see any women driving those big steamrollers and what have you out there, now do you? You men simply fear competition and never give women the opportunity to express themselves and rise above the sexist slave culture into which they are born!

Waldo finished reading what I had written so far and then nodded. "Sounds promising."

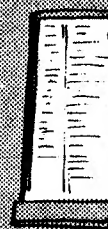
I sighed. "I suppose you'll have to arrest me?"

He frowned. "Albert, I don't want that damn freeway plowing through our neighborhood any more than you do. When you finish the letter, I'll mail it for you."

He sat down at the chessboard again. "Your move, Albert."



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